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# It's Laid Out in the Cards: How Meaning and Identity are Constructed through Tarot Reading

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**It's Laid Out in the Cards:**  
**How Meaning and Identity are Constructed through Tarot Reading**

Submitted to the Department of Anthropology/Sociology for the purpose  
of fulfilling the requirements for a Bachelor of the Arts Degree in  
Anthropology at Warren Wilson College.

By E. Baumholser  
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## Abstract

A Tarot card deck has 78 illustrated cards that represent different universal patterns of behavior, commonly known as archetypes. Jungian Philosophy plays a large roll in this aspect of the tarot, outlining the over encompassing archetypes that the tarot cards seem to base their meanings on. Through interviews with tarot readers (hobbyists, amateurs, and professionals) and applied anthropological theories—including theories not directly related to tarot reading—my participants establish the tarot as part of their identity in different ways. In conjunction to this, readers incorporate their backgrounds and skills to individualize their interpretations of the tarot and create an over encompassing ethical law for readers; borrowing theories from Inna Semetsky and Victor Turner. Drawing predominantly from Turner, David Zeitlyn and Dan Jorgensen, my participants describe their interpretations of the multi-layered, in-depth definitions given to each card, and reveal how they use other practices to fill in details during a reading. In addition, my participants outline the obstacles readers face in becoming a professional, the business aspects of the tarot, and the ritual of giving a tarot reading. Furthermore, I have applied my own experiences with tarot readings to add a client's point of view and observations of readers in action. To summarize, the process of constructing identity is used to analyze the cultural differences in each participant's background; creating moral law for the basis of community and maintain the title of Tarot Reader in a good light; and forming solid theory of how the tarot is used in these two processes. *(252 words)*

## Chapter I

### 0-The Fool: the Beginning of a Thesis on Cartomancy

Tarot card reading has been something I have been interested in since *Charmed* season one. As an occult interested person, I knew an occult shop was going to soon open in Asheville called the Raven and Crone. My roommate told me of their plans to open the year before and when it opened I went to look around to see if anything caught my interest. I was so excited because it had been the only occult shop I had ever been into. The day I had gone to meet Kim, the owner of the shop and a tarot reader of many years, she had left on an errand and I managed to meet the reader on duty instead.

The manager, after checking with the reader for availability and willingness to participate in my study, showed me to the tea room in the back of the shop where the reader was seated at a covered round table. The reader looked like Frances Conroy from *American Horror Story: Coven* (Season 3: Myrtle Snow). She was an older woman in her late 60s with a bright, curly, red mane to her shoulders, large round 70s style glasses—she looked like the embodiment of every stereotype I had ever made for a Tarot reader. The manager introduced her as Allison and seemed excited for something to do besides sitting in the back of the shop. She was enthusiastic as I told her about my thesis and handed her the consent form for her to sign explaining that she did not have to answer anything she didn't want to and had the rights to stop at any time. Allison seemed confused at why I had to explain that to her, but happily obliged the formality.

“I hope you have some sort of recorder because I'm going to talk faster than you can write things down,” was the first thing she said to me after handing the signed contract in my direction. At that point I don't know what came over me, but I got really excited and took out my tablet stumbling to turn it on. I set it on the table in between us and pulled out my giant thesis binder from my bag and took out my interview questions. I recall her looking amused as I pulled out the three-inch binder filled to the brim with my research from the previous semester.

“What's the first question?” she asked.

“Well, um, let's see, uh,” I stuttered stumbling over my words, “the questions will go from simple to more intimate or complex. Just let me know if you don't want to answer any of them. So the first question is: Do you have any other occupation then tarot reading?” Satisfied that I got the question out without too much difficulty through my nervous stuttering, she replied, “Yes I have two jobs.” Short, and to the point. She didn't seem to want to discuss it much so I moved on. “My next question is: what are your religious or spiritual and political views?”

“Well, I’m a white Jewish girl, but to tell you the truth, when you’re psychic religion kind of goes out the window. I’m an earth respect type. You could say I’m Wiccan or pagan—but once you label something it’s very limited. And I am liberal or left winged in my political views. You won’t find a republican readers. Especially if they are Wiccan, I don’t think they exist.”

“That makes sense since they seem to be two opposing views. Do these views have any impact on your readings?” At this, she just looked at me with this confused look. She crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair and said “No. Tarot reading is part of my life. I wake up every morning and start the day with a cup of coffee and a reading for the day before I even get dressed.” She then sat up and, thinking about what I had asked, said to me “that isn’t a very good question. Most people won’t be able to see how things like religion and politics influence their daily tasks.” I thought about it and she was right. You can’t ask someone how their views on life effect how they sweep a floor or how that influences what choices they made for lunch... and that is what she meant. At this point in life, for Allison, tarot reading had become something like brushing your teeth before bed or washing the dishes after dinner—or breathing air if you want to be dramatic with it. So asking her directly how her family being Jewish affected her ability to read tarot cards did seem silly.

She talked to me about her typical clients, what types of people she lets read for her, and whether she was a part of any groups, or practiced any other type of divination. We went on about where and how she does readings, the types of spreads she used, and the decks she liked using the best, and how much she charged. She told me “I don’t do this for money. This is a service I provide for humanity. This is something the world needs to know about and they need spiritual people like me to translate what the world is saying.” We talked for an hour or more going through my interview script. After the interview, she told me that she would read my tarot saying it was “for my research.” I can’t remember exactly what went through my head at this point, but I remember I was flabbergasted, excited, and nervous for my first professional tarot reading.

Allison was the first tarot reader I interviewed and as anticipated a few things went wrong, but I learned a lot from her. This excerpt displays not only how I constructed and directed my interviews, but how nervous and excited I really was to be talking to someone I had wanted to be like since Esmeralda from Disney’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. After eight years of interest in tarot reading, I was finally getting to talk with people who not only shared my interests but who I had idolized from a young age. Allison was the start of a two year journey to reinvent my own ideas surrounding the

practice of tarot reading, deconstruct the fortuneteller stereotype I had idolized, and develop an ethnographic story of my participants and tarot reader communities.

I put a lot of thought into choosing this topic. I have been using tarot cards for almost nine years collecting different decks along the way and developing an amateur ability to read for myself, my friends, and my class mates. I am, by no means, anywhere near a professional level, though I did gain many tips during my research. Tarot proved to be a great topic for me to do ethnographic research given my long time interest in the topic and Asheville's thriving psychic scene.

I structured this paper to resemble the story used to teach the meaning of tarot to beginning readers. It is called the Fool's Journey or the Hero's Journey. Kelley explains the Hero's journey in the following quote: "It starts with the Fool, an idea, and then goes through the life challenges everyone has to go through 'till the World. The World is the solution or the outcome, whether it is good or bad, and then it starts all over again—with either a more advanced version of the original idea or a new idea. Then, the four suits are the elements that you add to the situation to make it yours." This learning tool uses the archetypes from Jung's philosophical theory of the collective unconscious to tell the life story of the fool/hero from the beginning to the end. That is my goal, to tell the story of my participants and create an archetypal theory of the tarot reading community.

I will come back to the Fool's Journey in the following sections, but let me start from the beginning, 0: The Fool, and paint a picture of what I will discuss in the rest of my paper. I conducted 16 interviews with tarot readers from all different backgrounds and degree of skill (from hobbyists of five years to professionals of 64 plus years), and have focused my paper on the use of tarot as a medium for identity construction. Readers of the tarot construct their identity through their engagement with the cards, personalization of associated meanings to interpret the tarot, and struggle through their own Hero's Journey to become established members of their communities. In the following chapters, I explore and illustrate this point through laying out my finding to tell the stories of my participants in a way that will come full circle to XXI: The World.

After the foundations of my research are laid, I begin to tell this story with my participant's backgrounds and the starting points of their interest in reading tarot. I discuss two types of introductions (educational and healing) my participants described to me when asked when they started reading tarot. I incorporate how the backgrounds of my participants influence their interpretations of the tarot and how that may also influence the function of tarot reading for each of my participants. Along with that, I also will discuss how my participants view their own skill going into identity construction and their relations to a sort of cultural capital based hierarchy within the communities

creating ethical laws for professionals. I also touch on gender inequality and the definition of a fake tarot reader. From there, I move into the journey many of my participants took to become professional. The experiential knowledge and skills needed to add depth to a reading, the business aspects, the different paths a reader can take once established, and the rites of passage one goes through to gain the ability to make a profit from their skill. I wrap this journey up with stories from my participants from their experiences with clients and the cards themselves. Diving into the hidden meanings and appropriations with help from many other anthropologists throughout this paper, I end on XXI – the World; the complete picture of a community of witches, psychics, and intuitive readers.

### ***What is Cartomancy?***

Cartomancy, bibliomancy, geomancy, ceromancy, palmistry, numerology, astrology, rune reading, I Ching (Chinese method of cleromancy), scrying, and tasseography<sup>1</sup> are all forms of fortunetelling or divination (Bartlett 2014:5-7). Tarot card reading is a form of cartomancy; a divination technique using a deck of cards to provide answers to or insight regarding any question or focal point (spoken and unspoken). A tarot deck consists of 78 illustrated cards featuring two sections—the major and minor arcana. The major arcana is composed of 22 trump cards; each card is assigned a roman numeral (from 0 to XXI), a title (such as 'The Empress or 'The Wheel of Fortune), a meaning based on both the archetype the card itself is based on and its position in the spread, and an image symbolizing the title and the meaning. The minor arcana is composed of four suits of 14 cards each—much like the suits in a deck of playing cards with the addition of a Knight to each of the suits (page/jack, knight, queen, and king)—illustrated like the major arcana. The most common suits include: wands (clubs) symbolic of creativity and action; pentacles (diamonds) symbolic of health and wealth; cups (hearts) symbolic of love/relationships and emotion; and swords (spades) symbolic of thought and challenge. Each of these four spheres make up a person's existence and adds more in-depth meaning towards the individual card and how it plays a part in the deck rather than just the interpretations of the illustrations and associated numerology alone. Each deck is different, with different images and meanings based on illustrator and author of the handbook that is packaged with the deck.

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<sup>1</sup> Bibliomancy is the use of randomly selected lines in a book, typically the Bible, to answer a question. Geomancy is the interpretation of patterns in thrown handfuls of stones/soil/sand. Ceromancy is the interpretation of patterns in candle wax drippings. Palmistry is interpretations of the lines of one's hands. Numerology and astrology are the interpretation of numbers and planetary alignments. Rune reading is the interpretation of stones inscribed with Celtic runes. Cleromancy is the interpretations of casting lots using random numbers—such as when rolling dice. Scrying is the use of crystal balls, mirrors, and other reflective surfaces to provoke psychic visions. Tasseography is the interpretation of patterns left behind in the tea leaves or coffee grounds in a cup after the brewed beverage is consumed.



Readings look at many different aspects in a person's life from their past, present, and future to their hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses and can also provide insight from the universe on a client's problems and concerns on present and/or future events and plans, much like a New Age equivalent of going to confession or counseling. A reading is performed by randomly picking cards from a shuffled deck of tarot cards and placing them in a fixed pattern called a spread. A spread can use anywhere between one and 78 cards from the deck, and there are hundreds of different layouts. Many established readers create their own spreads based on years of experimenting with what works for their reading style.

### ***Where did Tarot Reading Begin?***

There are many origin stories for the deck within the community and within scholarly literature, though it is not the place of an anthropologist to prove or disprove a belief. These origin stories span from Ancient Egypt to Renaissance times and have popped up since the start of using tarot cards for divination purposes. Mike Sosteric (2014) gives a full historical background of tarot cards in his own work *A Sociology of Tarot*, where he correlated the use of tarot cards as a method of cartomancy to secret societies like the Free Masons. The true origin for the deck was just as a card game—much like the game of trumps that people still play—and Sosteric argues that there is not much evidence to “suggest it was anything other than a simple game of cards” (2014:361). Though this the historically accurate origin of Tarot, the tarot community has rooted itself into their cultural truths of an unknown origin and remain in a never ending debate. Juliette Wood, a professional folklorist and medieval specialist, describes this dilemma as an incomprehensible grey area created by a common phenomenon in which theorists piggyback off of other theorists without fact checking, creating a basis for confusion to take place (1998:16-22). The rapidness of cultural adaptation of the creation of these theories, causes the confusing overlap of inaccurate, plethora of origin theories and has created the perfect opportunity for tarot communities to create their own cultural truths of where they feel the deck came from. The points that Sosteric and Wood make about historical accuracy surrounding the origin stories fit perfectly with how many of my participants responded when asked their own theories on the subject.

### ***Who and Where?***

With the growing popularity of yoga life styles, homeopathic remedies, and organic foods, more and more people seem to be aligning themselves with a more spiritualistic take on life. Since I started my research in Asheville, I was able to benefit from the growing popularity of fortunetelling

in the area. This popularity could be a direct effect of the revocation of a North Carolina state law that prohibited all divinatory techniques except during church or school events and restricted to inside these buildings. This law was effective in 66 counties including Buncombe County (North Carolina Criminal Code G.S. 14-401.5). Though street readers are now required to apply for a street permit to sell their services in public areas like street corners and parks (much like street performers), the availability for these services has definitely increased since abolishing this law. According to the 2006 Baylor Religion Survey 12.8 percent of Americans believe in some form of fortune telling, and 12.5 percent of participants in the same survey reported to have called or consulted a medium, fortune teller, or psychic—19.0 percent in the East, and 8.4 percent in the South (Baylor 2006:45-48). Though Asheville does have a thriving market for tarot reading and fortunetelling, during my research I discovered some of my participants who worked in Asheville, either lived out of town or in another state. I was also surprised to realize not as many places employed tarot readers as I had originally assumed—two of the places I knew of had closed down before I started my research without my knowledge. I decided to expand my research pool to online communities and almost doubled my participant list. By coincidence, one of my participants from Asheville happened to be a member of the Facebook group I was able to communicate with. I will go into how I did my research in the next section, but to see an overlap in communities was very exciting for me as it gave me a tangible thread of confidence that I could truly create an over encompassing cultural story through my research.

## Chapter II

### How did I Research Identity and Meaning in Tarot Reading?

“The fortune tellers, all named Marie, wore bouffants matted into stiff caps of fashion, the tasseographers and cartomancers, our Queens of Hearts, their long red nails tapping cards as if to get their attention and ours away from slim cigarettes we nervously puffed, anticipating something yet to be, something we might yet become, spellbound by a desperation to grow up, to grow into someone else’s life, to get out, get away.” (Zawinski 2010:61)

This description of Gypsies is not far from what most people first think of when someone brings up the words tarot reader. It even was my own image since my visit to the French Quarter in

New Orleans, Louisiana in my sophomore year. It seemed to be, without fail, that every few blocks would have a sign that says tarot reader pointing into another alley, leading to a small courtyard. From there young women would call to passerby's luring them to come have their future told, and they all somehow embodied the stereotype of a hyper-dramatized, traveling-fair gypsy. Even middle-aged men at stalls in the middle of central parts of town embodied a Dr. Facilier (the Voodoo man from the Princess and the Frog) appearance. But that was also the appeal of a tarot reader: the clothes, the mysteries, the personas, and the freedom of choice to live a life of wonder and mysticism. I got my first tarot deck in my freshman year of high school. Fascinated with gypsies (mostly Esmerelda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) and witches from an early stage, tarot reading was the start of my path to finding my own way into the New Age movement but has remained a tool I use quite frequently in my life.

I started my research with local tarot readers where I found an occult shop called the Raven and Crone that had a daily tarot reader available. I introduced myself to the owners and asked their permission to interview their readers. At this moment, Kim (founder and owner of the establishment) presented herself as both interested and one of the readers for the shop and willing to let me interview her. (I'm going to interject here that for the sake of my project, all surnames are kept confidential as almost all of my participants consented to having their first names reflected in my research.) Through the Raven and Crone, I was able to interview four other tarot readers: Allison, Summer, Leigh, and Kelley; and one astrologer Mela. I decided to interview Mela to give me another perspective on divination through a related field. I expanded into the rest of Asheville first through Sage, a reader/life coach who reads on Merrimon Ave, and then to Dixie, an author/coven head/psychic/tarot reader who's coven stead is in Asheville. After looking in this community, I needed to expand into different communities to give my thesis some diversity and went to online communities and known associates in other states. First, I contacted Sapphire—a young witch and tarot hobbyist who expressed interest in my project—and conducted an interview through a video call on Google Hangouts. After that, through Facebook and email, I was able to correspond with Sharron, an experienced witch and tarot reader, who led me to her friends Laurel, and Lola, who lead me to a Facebook group called the Tarot Reader's Development & Study Group which is part of the International Tarot Foundation—through which I was able to communicate with Kirti, Richard, and Brittany. All of whom gave me interesting incite from different perspectives (with ranging cultural backgrounds) that I was able to add to my data from my participants in Asheville.

As mentioned above, I used interviews as a main source of my data collection. My interviews consisted of semi-formal, audio recorded interviews, informal interviews through email correspondences, video calls, and phone correspondences, as well as follow-up interviews. It is important to add here, because of the nature of my human subjects based research, that I gave each of my participants an Informed Consent Form (Appendix II) that outlined expectations, any and all risks, rights, and permissions the participant needed before we scheduled our interviews. With each interview, I recorded the discussion with a recorder application on my tablet and phone (only if given signed permission through the consent form), so I did not miss anything during the transcription process. Though when interviewing many of my online participants, it was easier to give them a copy of my interview guide and have the participant fill it in on their own time. Though this is technically considered a survey, I have (for the purpose of my research) treated these responses as interviews because as I went through their answers, I readily responded with any follow-up questions I had.

I followed an interview guide (Appendix I) that was modeled after Jorgensen's interview schedule from his dissertation (1978:266-67). Jorgensen presented a functioning model for me to work with: adding my own questions and altering the guide as my participants formed more interesting pathways for my thesis to turn into. I also created two separate guides to cater to my varying participants, since my original was geared towards the participant being a professional reader, a separate guide was created that altered some questions to the assumption the participant had a career or job and did tarot reading as a side service for friends, family or anyone who asked. Many of my questions were to determine religious and political preferences, locations and rates of readings, preferred decks and spreads, as well as determine the relationships between readers in the community. I related these findings to the Orion's surveys relating to witch demographics in America (1995:59-75) to create a profile type for readers who participated in my research. Though the interview script went on to obtain more intimate details of how participants started reading and their many personal philosophies regarding the tarot. During my interviews, I determined how other divinatory techniques were incorporated in tarot reading to aid the interpreter using divination as a domain. I have applied this data in later sections to discuss at length the ways in which layers of meaning change based on these numerous different factors.

As about half of my interviews were audio-recorded, I spent a lot of time transcribing them into code-able data that would allow me to decipher how my participants' answers related to each other. Using open and axial coding methods to conceptualize the data I collected in my interviews, I was able to find the key themes that would form the story and create the thesis I was working for. I

applied works from Victor Turner, David Zeitlyn, and Danny Jorgensen, to name a few, to give my thesis a solid foundation to base my findings on and fully understand to what extent individual identity effects the creation of meaning and the interpretations given by tarot readers. Within the coded data, I also found different social constructions that bear an effect on the readers' interpretations and how readers create their own form of social conduct for working in public and criteria for being seen as a good reader—all of which play into the creation of self-identity and the creation of the “them” group. Also drawing from works based in other types of communities, I found enough similarities to create a cohesive vision of what the tarot reader communities looked like and how they function.

Along with interviews, I used my shorthanded, ethnographic, field notes on tarot readings given to me by my participants. I audio-recorded two different types of tarot readings: the first was a reading at a coffee shop, a public and relatively quick, situation based reading; the other was a reading in Sage's office, a longer, more elaborate, life-coach-esca, ritualistic reading. With the differences in ritual style, I have compared and gave an analysis of both in the following chapters determining the atmosphere and personal experience for the client (me) as two major factors in constructing the meaning from the cards themselves. I analyzed the data in my interviews and compared them to research done by Jorgensen and Luhrman to help identify different elements related to tarot that effect interpretation (such as community elements found in witchcraft and Vodou, also elements of subcultural significance like rites of passage). I incorporated the information I laid out in the following chapter (my literature review) to decipher my own experiences and relate my findings to that of more experienced anthropologists like Zeitlyn and Turner. I have only had my tarot cards read four times professionally, so using the data collected from these two readings, I created a more rounded idea of how tarot readers conduct their service with hands on experiences.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Shuffling the Cards of Divinatory Theory**

The word divination is defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary, as “the art or practice that seeks to foresee or foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge usually by the interpretation of omens or by the aid of supernatural powers.” An overview of the research has a continuous loop of how theorists have been ineffectual in creating a functional definition of divination as a cultural phenomenon (Luhrman 1989, Sosteric 2014, Wood 1998, Zeitlyn 2001). As stated in a previous chapter, tarot reading is one of many forms or techniques for cartomancy in which a diviner or reader uses a deck of 78 cards to interpret the future events of a client or quarent. This practice is

theorized to originate from many different eras and countries: from ancient Egypt, to medieval France. So, in order to create a foundation for my research, I had to start with the literature to gather as much information as I could to create a solid, functioning wall of the existing information to base my argument on.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which tarot is used, viewed, and forms community among its practitioners by other anthropologists, historians and academics. Using theories from Victor Turner, Dan Jorgensen, and others, I explain how Tarot readers interpret the cards through the use of dialogue and polyvalent symbolism. I use academics such as Tanya Luhrmann, Karen Brown, and Loretta Orion to establish how tarot readers create their identity by comparing tarot reading communities to communities of witchcraft, Vodou, and similar practices. I also borrow from theorists Mike Sosteric, Inna Semetsky, and Richard Sieburth (to name a few) to explore how divination is used in other cultures. In the following section, I start my foundation with the ideas of divinatory dialogue, existential sociology and polyvalent symbolism, which I found were the prominent theoretical foundation of my research.

### ***Dialogue and Polyvalent Symbolism in the Tarot***

Many anthropologists and theorists have used the concept of dialogue to give meaning to all types of human interaction from body language to dialectic communication. I use this concept to further define how meaning is created in tarot card reading. Helan Page defines dialogue as “a communicative exchange that is negotiated among individuals or between groups in a way that gender, ethnicity, or class identifications become strategic tools” (1988:1). Page’s definition is confirmed in Sarah Caldwell’s interpretation (referencing Jorgensen) of divination is a story that is pieced together through dialogue between the client and the reader through the reader’s use of questions and general statements to coax responses from the client (2007:9). Though Caldwell’s interpretation can be seen as a sign of falsehood within the tarot community (see *Morals of a Tarot Reader* in Chapter V). Regardless of falsehoods, dialogue plays a large role in interpreting tarot reading and many other divinatory techniques. David Zeitlyn (2001) states that divinatory techniques represent a combination of dialogue and possible symbolic outcomes. For example, tarot cards shape possible symbolic outcomes by the different combinations of cards, the spread, and associations of meaning given to each card in a reading. However, without dialogue between diviner and client, the diviner won’t be able to pin point the correct path through the webs to create the full story. To further this concept, Jorgensen describes five different types of utterances made by the

diviner and three for the querent or client in his article *Divinatory Discourse*. Jorgensen states that the five types of basic utterances by reader include: 1- Statements of possible facts (questions or declarations), 2- interpretive statements (judgements, pro/prescriptions, advice, elaborate utterances, explanations, or attributions of esoteric significance), 3- instructive statements provides directions about practices, meanings, or matters of procedural importance, 4- responsive/acknowledgement statements to direct or implied questions of the querent, and 5- qualifying statements to modify, qualify or disclaim previous or following comments (1984:139-40). This is exactly what I had always envisioned in my mind of dialogue from a gypsy fortune teller—I say gypsy here because whenever I envisioned tarot readers, before discovering I could learn tarot myself, I always envisioned them being Romani gypsies (like Madam Simza Heron in *Sherlock Holmes 2*). To me, these types of utterances Jorgensen described seemed like basic, almost common, amongst all conversations in divination or therapy. Jorgensen goes on to describe the three basic utterances for querents as 1- confirmation or verification/rejection or denials of supposed faces and requests for specific or additional information; 2- translations of statements; and 3- revelations about self or particular situations (1984:140). Again, this seems typical of any consultation for a client, whether that be for divination or real-estate. However, it is helpful for understanding how a general dialogue during a tarot reading is outlined using Jorgensen's work.

Semetsky, on the other hand, takes the use of dialogue and applies it to human development. During her research in the effect of using tarot in the education system, she called tarot “the language of signs that speaks in images and symbols and articulates many of humanity's ethical, intellectual, and spiritual lessons” (2009:111, Tedlock 2013:23). The Fool's journey is a perfect example of Semetsky's idea of tarot as a language. Through all the lessons in life the fool or hero comes too there is an outcome. Though, building off of tarot as a language of symbols that one learns when learning the Tarot, in a chapter 13 of *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, it reads:

“Divinatory dialogue is based on western culture's ability to think symbolically and have a symbolic attitude (which fires the richness of language, poetry, humor, and creativity) ‘Natural Human Faculty’ of divination which everyone has to some degree. An attempt to ascertain the truth is seen as the essential divinatory function” (Thorley, et al 2013:260-61).

While stating dialogue to be essential for divination, Anthony Thorley, Chantal Allison, Petra Strapp, and John Wadsworth widen divinatory dialogue to be part of an ability that everyone has, not just a learnable skill, to create a language for translating symbols and images automatically. Though Semetsky

dips into the realm of psychology, through the lenses of linguistically anthropology I can assume that my participants will all be able to speak this language of symbols—allowing me to creating a subcultural signifier to identify within the tarot reading community (like in Norma Medoza-Denton’s ethnography *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs*).

Building off of the learning aspect incorporated by Semetsky, I pulled from the theory of existential sociology to accurately describe interactions with the tarot. Jorgensen describes existential sociology as “the study of human experience in the world in all of its forms” (1979:4). Learning in and of itself is experiential, however this theory can be spread across all fields of experience. It is acceptable to state that everyone experiences life differently: fear, humor, physical ailments, learning, and so on. The best way to relate this theory to my research in the tarot, is with the addition of polyvalent symbolism. Turner defines polyvalent symbolism as a web of associated meanings that is created by an individual’s interpretation. Through divinatory techniques, such as the tarot, a web of meanings is associated with different aspects of a reading—such as cards in a tarot spread—and will change based on the client and the reader. In some cases, even if those aspects (client and reader) are the same the web of meanings can still change (Tedlock 2001:192, Turner 1967:19-47, Whyte 1991, Zeitlyn 2001:229). With the combination of these two ideas, I can conclude that learning the tarot is comparable to learning the meaning of a religious texts like the bible. No two teachings are the same, because of the difference in interpretation, and no two students will receive the teaching in the same way, because the information is still up to interpretation. Though Jorgensen was contradicting Western Culture’s idea of meaning is created through science and Christian beliefs, he contests that meaning must come from the people within the community, not just from the dominant beliefs because existential sociology defines meaning as individual and shaped by an individuals’ surroundings (such as the community) (1979:2, 4). Therefore, though members of the tarot community all speak the same language there will be dialects of it, small interpretational differences, or differences in technique—this could lead to a hierarchy of cultural capital in the argument of the right way to read the tarot. Furthermore, I use these differences to create a full idea of who “they” are—“they” referring to Dick Hebdige’s (1979) notion of “them” in contrast to Barbra Tedlock’s (2013) idea of “sacred self” (much like Sarah Thornton’s (1995) idea of “the Self”)—as well as to identify the ethics and morals created within the community to fully define those whom the community does not associate with. It is through culture and community that identity is started and I will discuss the theories I found relating to this in the following section.



### ***Identity Created through Self and Other Subcultures***

Social constructions such as stereotypes, race, and gender also play into the individual interpretation of the world, as well as tarot reading. Just as divination has an elaborate web of associated meaning; the occult (in this context occult is used to describe Wicca and like religious practices that use tarot in their practices) has an esoteric networking of community that creates that meaning. Jorgensen explains the esoteric community as “cultic milieu” or an index of readers, occultists, practitioners, occult shop owners, as well as non-practitioners that come to have their cards read (1982). It is within these communities, where meaning and practices are identified and defined. In the case of tarot reading, the community plays a factor of varying interpretations on the individual level on how each reader was taught how to interpret the cards (see Chapter IV). The essence of being from a different community is to have a different way of thinking, based on the concept of the “cultic milieu”. However, Juliette Wood (1998) and Zeitlyn describe a shift from communal to individual within the divinatory sphere. Zeitlyn describes the transformation of divination as “a community of interest being replaced by self-interest” meaning an activity that was once communal changes to an individual one without help or input from the whole (2001:228). Even today, the United States has innovated from a nation waiting to see a groundhog’s prediction of the coming of spring to individuals checking their daily horoscopes in the local paper.

The self or the sacred self are significant in the individuation of identity construction among diviners, and other occult members. The idea of the “sacred self,” as previously mentioned, is the theory of exploring and practicing self-knowledge and the transformative efficiency of healing through the experience of the numinous—the Sacred Self being comprised of imagination, memory, and language (Tedlock 2013). The self is the person who is doing the research, exploring possibilities, and finding their identity within the world scope. It can be related to a collected consciousness as discussed by Carl Jung. Jungian philosophy is used by many tarot readers to describe the archetypes discussed in teaching the tarot (like in the Fool’s Journey). “Through tarot hermeneutic we connect with the imaginal, archetypal, world and achieve gnosis by re-wakening the collective memory gained by humankind over the course of its history even if this memory is as yet latent in the field of Jungian collective unconscious,” (Semetsky 2011:257). The Sacred Self can be the individuation of Jung’s collective unconscious described by Semetsky. Though, Tedlock uses the sacred self to describe how dream oracles learn the meanings derived from the symbolism weaved in dreams. I relate it to Karen Brown’s description of how Vodou is taught: “my mother teach me a lot’a thing. She show me how

to read card. My mother start to show me; then, after that, I dream and the spirit finish... they finish show me how to read card in that dream,” (Brown 2001:77). I infer the use of dreams as the “sacred self” is prominent in the learning of tarot (and other practices) in Vodou and can influence the making of a reader’s identity. I experienced a similar phenomenon to what Brown describes in her book, *Mama Lola*, when I was learning the tarot—it was a few weeks after I had learned to shuffle and handle the extra length of tarot cards. I started having dreams of an older gypsy woman I named “Mama.” She had three daughters (that hated me) and lived in a trailer that I would walk to at the beginning of my dream. Mama is the one who taught me the way of the cards, in her screened-in porch on the side of the double-wide. Though I found it irrational to attribute my ability to read tarot cards to an old woman in my dreams, when I would tell people about how Mama taught me the tarot, the reactions seem to give Mama an authority status that is much like how Camela Elias describes Cooke’s philosophy of Tarot. “The idea with tarot is to learn the teachings of One as Self, and to know the Self as One. [...] there’s only one prophet and only one redeemer, the Self as You,” (2014:7). In her research, One refers to a spirit that speaks to Cooke through a Ouija board telling him how and what the universe is, but this concept of self is still present. Much like my experience with Mama, One gave Cooke his information to create his great influence on the tarot community. The Self is recognized as both an authority and a source of power that lives within you—through dreams, or intuition—and will mold a reader’s construction of their identity.

Building off of the importance of the self, Semetsky identifies the “existential function is [...] self-creation, or creation of the self, because it is when new meanings are constructed and become available to consciousness that the old self is put off and the new self is forming,” (2009:110). Forming identity comes through the tarot in the form of existential sociology and the “archetypal symbols of man’s unconscious, representing the unfoldment of his unconscious, possessing man’s built-in destiny” (Elias 2014:6-7) represented in the tarot. Relating back to polyvalent symbolism, the individual’s ability to interpret the divinatory language presented in the tarot depends on the way in which a reader identifies with the cards.

Though, because not all tarot readers were born into communities that teach tarot from childhood (like Semetsky’s research is in favor of), I argue the ways in which identity is created in tarot communities are derived from the individual’s background—through heritage, religious and regional culture. Loretta Orion used surveys across the United States to determine the demographics of individuals are attracted to witchcraft (1989:53-77). Determining religious backgrounds, political standings, levels of education, and career choices (of those who replied to the survey) to create a full

theory of who is more drawn to natural, magical, earth-based religions. I use a similar approach to who my participants are and better understand how and why readers turn to tarot reading. Through background and the way identity is created in other similar subcultures like witchcraft or vodou, I assess how tarot readers create their identity with communal and individual ideals (see Chapter IV).

As stated previously, the United States use several types of divination that is weaved through our everyday culture. Zeitlyn explores several types of divination from financial forecasts in business, to reading spider webs in Africa. Though he defines a problem readers of tarot cards, being their lack of needing any experience in the practice, arguing that readers do not need any experience, and use the cards as a justification to make accusations about the client (2001:230). The way readers or diviners acquire their esoteric knowledge varies from culture to culture, though it is through the rapid changes and adaptations of culture that these methods change and take on different meanings through time.

### ***Roles of Divination in Other Cultures***

Because tarot is not a widely acceptable topic of inquiry, much of the foundation of my research stems from relative information based in other subcultures. As stated previously, divination is an umbrella term for many different techniques that interpret an object or set of objects to depict possibilities of the future. In addition, the use of divination differs from culture to culture based on the theory of existential sociology, though not as different as one would think. For instance, Zeitlyn found dialogue is used as a way to clarify or check the accuracy of a divinatory session during Tswapong Wisdom Divination (2001:233-234), whereas dialogue in tarot can be used for both clarification and a way to gain information. Tarot is functionalized as a way to understand or diagnose situations in the past or present to better prepare for or predict future events (Brown 2001, Zeitlyn 2012). Though divination practices like financial forecasting is used by businesses to either be ironic or paradoxical divination—describing how economists use financial records to better understand past fluctuations and present financial standings to either predict future bankruptcy or success. (Zeitlyn 2012:534-536). Financial diviners, use the information to inform or affect change in their companies the same as in tarot reading, though what makes it paradoxical is the active way in which these financial predictions are made false or true. Solidifying how societal and cultural influences vary the meaning of different interpretations of divination as well as the individual action taken place after the predictions.

Another example of how culture influences how divination is perceived is the works of Marlene Dobkin in the Peruvian use of cartomancy as an alternative medicine form called *naipes*.

The use of a divinatory technique such as that of the *naipes* can tap the culturally-induced stresses that are contributory to illness in many cases. A healer utilizing such a technique can “remove the agency and responsibility for a decision from the sick person and cast it upon the heavens... when this procedure is combined with ritual, attitudes toward the diviner and his paraphernalia are reaffirmed.” A divination technique, if cleverly manipulated by a healer, can permit an understanding of the source of disorder, which may be seen by the healer to be part of conflict-filled and anxiety-laden social relationships.

Much like in Vodou as described by Brown, cartomancy is used to diagnose a problem and even heal a deeply sewn into the fabric of a person. Though with the use of divination techniques as alternative to therapy, there are societal ethics that were created to identify or describe the characteristics of a reader. “The person who takes it upon himself to read the cards must not be frivolous but sincere and strong. He also must be an observant person, who washes his hands and face before using the cards,” (Dobkin 1969:132-35). Having a code of ethics for readers seems logical when being applied to therapeutic techniques for high stress areas such as the area of Peru that Dobkin studied. I use these alternative examples of divination to give my research a broader foundation to create a communal outlook of tarot in later chapters. Using these examples of how other cultures use divination, I can conclude that the use of divination has not only been a part of many cross-cultural beliefs, but also has been used in the United States undetected even though popular religious beliefs shun and even condemn the use of divination (referring to the Southern “Bible Belt” mentality).

## ***Conclusion***

One large issue with these works, is that it is all theory based on individual interpretations. Even in Wood’s work to find historical accuracy, she concludes that the accuracy of divination is in the hands of the society because the rapid grown of culture adapts theories and turns them into cultural truths (1998:22). Another issue with this research, as many theorists blatantly point out, is that we still lack a functioning definition for divination. Each theorist has described a few different aspects of divination that overlap each other. A full ethnography of divination has yet to be written. This deficiency in the research relates back to Tedlock’s findings of how theorists have subjectively

written about divinatory techniques, keeping divination out of the realm of objectivity, which “is the domain of a researcher’s explanations” (2001:195). Overall, the concepts of meaning through dialogue, polyvalent symbolism, and existential sociology are well argued as being main sources of understanding the different aspects of divination. In attempts to conceptualize divination, both Tedlock and Zeitlyn mention different types of divination, taking into account the different ways people use divinatory techniques. Though they do not create a generalized definition of what divination is, they do create a map of ways to categorize different types of divination into revelatory divination and interpretive divination (Zeitlyn 2001:226; Tedlock 2001:190). This critique gives future theorists (and myself) a challenge to create a functional definition by looking at divination in a more objective light. Rather than trying to create a subjective ethnography of Tarot (*it is a thing because people do it*) I am going to decipher how readers create their identity through their engagement with the cards, personalization of associated meanings to interpret the tarot, and struggle through their own Hero’s Journey to become established members of their communities. I will bring divination into the objective realm by putting aside my biases and opinions surrounding divination.

## **Chapter IV**

### **“I’m just an Interpreter...” Introducing Identity**

“No matter if you believe in the tarot or not it’s just like the ocean and the moon. You don’t have to believe that the moon pulls off the ocean, but they’ve proven it does, and it pulls off our water because we are 85 percent water as humans. So, you don’t have to believe the moon affects you, or the planets affect you, it still does whether you agree consciously or not. [...] It’s personal and universal at the same time and I find that most things are either one or the other, and the tarot is both. That’s the beauty of it,” (Kelley).

My goal in this study is not to prove or disprove the tarot, but to tell the story of my participants. Out of my 16 participants, I was able to obtain general information that can be calculated into quantitative data such as political and religious views, income brackets, average length of a reading, typical questions and clients, and so on. I did not calculate these percentages or create the charts to visually tell me what the typical aspect of tarot readers in this study are like. However, I have molded the backgrounds of each reader to understand why certain beliefs are upheld rather than others based on where they came from. In this chapter, I compare my own quantifiable data

to that in Orion's survey in 1995; introduce and describe how each of my participants started their fool's journey into the art of tarot reading through heredity, self-exploration, and paths of healing; as well as exploring how each of my participants view not only their skill but the tarot as part of their identity.

### ***Introductions and Preferences***

At this point, I have introduced Allison, my first participant from The Raven and Crone; referenced Kelley, a reader in Asheville; and mentioned Kim, the owner of The Raven and Crone, in the first chapter. Before I start in on this section, I am going to talk a about Kim as she gave me the opportunity to do my research at her shop being the most significant channel of communication. I first met Kim when her shop opened in Asheville—it was the first shop to be completely esoteric and fully white witch approved in the area. So my boyfriend at the time took me as a date, and as soon as I walked through the doors it truly felt like I belonged. Behind the counter there were two women, one was an older, buxom woman with greying hair and the other a slender, raven haired woman with one silver streak. As we made introductions and small talk, I remember thinking how they both looked as though they were witches in a passed life, and how much it showed in their appearances and demeanors. It was during this preliminary time that I was introduced to Kelley, a happy blonde woman—picture comedian Amy Schumer with a more square face. Kelley and I talked a lot before my research started, mostly about preferences in reading techniques and discussion on what I wanted to do my research on. Later on, I had come back to meet with Kim, the slender woman with raven hair and one silver streak, to ask her if she would be interested in helping me with my research. She scheduled a time to meet with me for an interview, as well as gave me contact information to many of her in-house tarot readers, thus starting my research pool. Using the Raven and Crone, I was able to branch out into Asheville and once my cousin agreed to help, I decided to extend my reach to the internet. All but three of my participants fit the image of white, American, female tarot reader: Kirti, a tarot reader in Bangalore, India; Richard, a male non-professional tarot reader with 15 years of experience; and Mela, an astrologer who works at the Raven and Crone (though she sometimes reads tarot). These three participants expanded my research to cross-cultural, multi-gendered, and interdisciplinary overlaps in the tarot community.

As most interviews are formatted, my script started from general and then went into specific. I started with conversational pleasantries, then into some general questions regarding religious and political views, followed by general questions about how and where my participants read tarot. Then I started asking more personal questions like why did you start to read the tarot, what made you want

to go professional or not, and so on. I started out this way because I wanted to know what types of people read tarot, but after my meeting with Allison, I mostly kept the questions out of curiosity to see if they would answer the questions the same way. Orion used many different census information to create a coherent chart to express the types of personalities that are common in pagan communities. My own data reflects much of these charts, “24 percent of the respondents who answered the question declared that they had no political affiliation. [...] The remainder (46 percent) indicated affiliations with the following parties (in descending order): Liberal, Independent, Anarchist, other, Libertarian, Socialist, Green Radical, and two percent are affiliated with the Progressive party,” (1995:62). In my own research, almost all of my participants identified themselves in the 46 percent that Orion describes. Though there were some who chose not to answer or were issue based on their positions in politics, I categorized the majority of my participants as Liberal or Independent. Summer, another tarot reader from The Raven and Crone, identified herself as an Anarchist when asked what her political views were—I think I had given her a surprised or confused look because she continued to explain her position by stating:

It's more like wanting to go back to consensus-based governing and grassroots organizing—the kind of things that were present before the creation of state governments or whatever. [...] I think that's ideal because then every person's voice is heard and that's really important to me. I've searched high and low and I feel like the closest you can get today is that [anarchist perspective] and I've been a lot of campaigns where we sit around and we make consensus-based decisions. And that's what works, you know, so that everyone is heard.

Many of my participants, including Summer, agreed with Allison’s perspective of political involvement within the tarot community: “you won’t find a republican witch, I don’t think they exist.” Allison implied that many, if not all, tarot readers are some degree of liberal, free thinker. Though I had already found this thought to be a logical assumption for tarot readers before I started my research, it did end up being quite accurate. Though Allison (and a few other participants) disagreed when I asked if politics took part in the way they interpreted the cards, I found through Summer that her feminist, anarchist political stance came out in her readings in the form of what decks she most liked to use, and the types of symbols she interpreted in her readings. For instance Summer enjoys a Mother Moon Peace deck which has mostly female persons and feminist symbolism. Brittany also discussed how her political views effect how she reads tarot by stating:

As a libertarian who will be voting for Sanders, my concern is for the rights and responsibilities of the individual. I emphasize messages about how to see the situation differently and how to take personal responsibility for evolving to be the kind of person the querent wants to be and building the kind of world the querent wants to inhabit.

Emphasizing these types of messages shows the incorporation of not only her political standings but also her code of ethics. Brittany also shared her religious beliefs to be spiritual and her incorporation of that creates an atmosphere that is more directed at the cards rather than the tarot reader—which relates to Zeitlyn's ideal that the divination technique should be included into the divinatory dialogue (2001:238).

Out of my 16 participants, I knew only two of them before deciding to conduct research for this topic. Sharron, my second cousin, I met when I was 13—just entering the beginning of my interest in Wicca and tarot reading—at a family reunion and have remained really close over the years despite the distance and age gap. When I told her about my topic, Sharron agreed to help me as a non-professional reader who picked up an interest in tarot when she was 11. During our interview she identified her political views as being Green to Independent (also placing her in Orion's 46 percentile) with an eclectic Christian childhood, but discovered paganism in college and has been following her own path ever since. The other is Sapphire—a hereditary witch and recent college graduate in North Carolina. We got to know one another over the course of a few months working together, and we've been very close ever since. Both my cousin and Sapphire related to me on a pagan/witchcraft level starting out as birds of a feather. Both proved to have great unique insights to many different aspects of the tarot community.

When I asked about the religion each of my participants I was more interested in the religion they grew up in, as well as what faith or belief system they have chosen to follow or practice in their adult life. I thought about my own religious past and saw a definite cause and effect from mystical interest, to being bullied to paganism, to Wicca, to tarot. However, that is not always the case—some tarot readers come from Jewish backgrounds (like Allison), or Catholic/Christian backgrounds like many of my other participants. Though about three-quarters of the answers I got resulted in some form of “no my religious and political views do not impact my belief in the tarot,” Summer, who also has a degree in Anthropology, was one of few people who could explain how religion is incorporated in the cards by going into the iconography of the decks, showing me the different symbols and their origin ties to different religious sects. Whereas, Allison's explanation sums up the reason why I



received so many responses on the non-influence of their religious backgrounds: “that’s like asking someone if the way the sweep the floor or does the dishes effects their daily life.” I did find the majority of my participants, though having some sort of structured mono-theistic background, have conformed to a more spiritual practice or earth-based religion in their adult lives since using the tarot.

### ***The Three Paths to Tarot***

There are three types of beginnings or paths for a person to start reading the tarot. Either they are taught by a family member who reads the tarot (generally it will be their mother or grandmother), self-taught because they were given a deck and became interested or vice versa, or suffered during a life changing event and started reading to help cope with their situation. These three distinctions are not definite either some overlap. For instance, both Kim and Sapphire started learning how to read tarot cards of her own curiosity and later found that a close family member (Kim’s grandmother and Sapphire’s mother) read tarot as well. In Sapphire’s case, not only did her mother help by giving Sapphire her deck and her curiosity stemmed from a conversion of faith to Wicca during a long period of abuse. Sapphire is the only participant who crosses all three paths—which I will explain further in the following section.

On the path of hereditary, I would like to add the gypsy perspective as I will continue to relate my participants to gypsies. In Romani culture, women are the keepers of many aspects of everyday life: sex, family ties, cultural knowledge, and fortune-telling. Schurr and Ioviță conducted research that found how gypsies were marginalized when they first came to Europe. They also found a sex-mediated gene flow where women traveled more than men to find partners and residence, which resulted in the transmission of cultural traditions in Roma populations through time (Ioviță an Shurr 2004:276). The identity markers expressed in these reality shows fantasize Gypsy culture by revealing celebration, women’s fashion, and personal expression as key factors of identity. The passing of fortune telling is seen as a hereditary gift of “sight” that is passed down from mother to daughter (as elaborately displayed through a television show called *American Gypsies*). Though I did not interview any Romani tarot readers, Laurel did discuss how her mother taught her to read the cards without aid:

My mother had a deck when I was in high school, back almost to the Dark Ages. ;-) One day I asked her if I could play with them, so she had me lay them out and give her a reading without telling me the focus of the reading, let alone the question! I gave her a few more readings with that deck and she always seemed thoughtful and satisfied with what I had to say...and no, she never did give me any

hint as to what the focus of the readings might be. When I went away to college a couple of years later, she told me that I should take the deck with me because that seemed to be where it belonged.

Like the Romani, Laurel was given the gift from her mother. However, this was not always a sign of skill or cultural capital. Summer mentioned that she was not like “hereditary readers who get their ability through family.” Making the struggle to learn the tarot through hard work a more desirable factor—though I did not find any more or less merit in learning tarot from a family member, I did notice the majority of my participants learned tarot through their own curiosity.

The path of education and exploration is the most common start to tarot reading. I myself started tarot as an interest: purchasing a deck, self-taught through study and research. Kirti started her path to becoming a tarot reader by waking up one morning, calling the first tarot reader in the directory and asking if they would teach her. She has not looked back since and have become quite experienced. Richard also started his path to a 15 year journey of tarot reading through happening upon the only deck of cards in a book store while vacationing in Barcelona. He recalled “I had no reason to enter that bookstore in Barcelona, but when I did the Waite book almost appeared right in front of me. It was their only copy and the Marseilles was the only deck in the store.” Though the start of the interest varies from reader to reader, each has a way to have a deck (either through gift or purchase), learn the symbolism either on their own or with a teacher, and explore the path to tarot reading.

The last path is more sad—or happier if you are a glass-half-full type of person. The use of reading tarot as a coping method is a rare yet influential path of a tarot reader. Only one of my participants started learning tarot strictly as a coping device and that was Dixie. Dixie was institutionalized by her parents to an insane asylum called “Graves” and was horribly abused. “I found a battered Rider-Waite deck there, mastered it in minutes, and my fellow patients so benefited from my prescience that staff sought me out, and — viola! — I took over, stopped the abuse, and got out sooner than anyone ever had (in a mere 5 months).” Though Dixie has recently lost her eye sight, she never really needed the cards. Claiming to be psychic, she uses the cards to mask what she already can see. As a High Priestess of her own coven in Asheville, Dixie embodies a stereotype of a “Crone blind seer” which is an old association with Witches. “Not a detriment but a typical Pagan paradox or example of ‘opposite’ magic.” The Crone is the eldest in the triple goddess myths—symbolized by the grandmother witch, the Crone is typically very old and wise, but as a fortune-teller or psychic she is also blind to enhance the ability to see beyond (featured in *American Horror Story: Coven* and as the

gypsy woman in *Drag Me to Hell*). Dixie is an extreme case, though rare through the representation of my participant pool, I do not know how many tarot readers start out like Dixie.

On the less extreme side, coping could be anything from loss to illness (like Summer). Leigh, another Raven and Crone reader who also is a multidisciplinary therapist in her day job, discussed how her path was more exploratory but correlated with a life changing event:

I went to her [a friend who has her own tarot deck—Onça O’Leary’s] workshop because I was bored, and wanted to go on a road trip with a friend of mine. But, right before I left I was in a temple for 10 years as an initiate to learn how to do meditation, and ceremonies, and all those types of things, and the last part of my training was in tarot.

I also was leaving my marriage, so I left a lot of things all at once, but I picked up the tarot.

Leigh crosses the line from exploratory to a method of coping with a divorce. Tarot can be proven as a useful coping tool when starting from a time of grief—as in the practice of *naipes* in Peru (Dobkin 1969). In my own experience, I used the cards to cope with my severely injured hand—even so far as shuffling the cards for physical therapy (not to mention the relief when a reading ends with “everything will be fine” as many of my readings at times of stress ended with). No matter which path my participants took to tarot, each of them ended up with the same conclusion: Tarot is for helping people.

### ***The Functionality of Tarot Reading as a Skill***

Almost all of my participants find tarot reading to be a skill used to help people. “While there is considerable variation among occupations, they are overrepresented in human service fields: counseling, social work, teaching, and health care. In this context it is not surprising that many occultists see themselves as counselors of sorts,” (Jorgensen 1982:377). Regardless of their own abilities, each of my participants relate the tarot as a therapeutic tool either for themselves to gain insight on their own lives or to help others with theirs. I have discussed the use of existential function and existential sociology revolving the use of the tarot in chapter III. Here I will discuss how each of my participants use their skill, and how they identify with tarot reading.

As previously mentioned, both Allison and Dixie use their abilities with the tarot as a crutch or a distraction from their true ability as psychics. Dixie even claimed to be able to read peoples mind while distracting them in a reading. However, there is a spectrum of skill within the tarot community. Sapphire is a hobbist of tarot, and much prefers to use runes (much like Kim) as it is much easier to get a broader or narrower answer. Though Mela is the true opposite end of the spectrum from Allison and Dixie. Mela can read cards but prefers astrology. Much like Sapphire’s preference to runes, Mela

states that Astrology is much more encompassing than Tarot by using the symbolism of the planets in a much more accurate time frame. Mela discusses how she uses astrology for her clients to not only have readings similar to that of tarot readings but also to help plan events in a client's life: from wedding planning to child rearing.

When asked the philosophy of the tarot I got a plethora of answers from origin stories to personal definitions of tarot cards. Overall participants thought tarot was a tool to give advice or translate the universe in a set of ancient symbolism. Though Kirti was the only reader that held the position that tarot was specifically a numbers technique using card counting and numerology and did not believe in the spiritual aspects of the cards—much like that of John Cooke's perspectives of the archetypes also described by Jungian philosophy (Elias 2014) .

With the idea that tarot reading is used for good, many of my participants discussed how they were “like religious therapists” or “just an interpreter” creating their identity as a tarot reader. Using the existential function of tarot as to find the self, I can conclude that the ideas of how a reader views and identifies the tarot deck will directly effects how a reader will identify their relationship with the cards. I argue that their interaction with the cards on this level directly affects how identity is created on the individual level. For instance, Allison identified herself as just an interpreter translating the divinatory language to a client for the universe. Though her devotion to her deck is paramount—“I start my day with a cup of coffee and a reading even before I'm out of my pj's.” Allison's identity along with the majority of my participants describe their relationship with their tarot cards to be a defining factor of their identity.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I have discussed and introduced many of my participants, as well as their backgrounds. The three paths of starting to learn tarot, and how the community has created the one true meaning of the tarot—to help people. In the next chapter, I will discuss how ritual differs between types of reading, the rites of passage someone will go through to become a professional tarot reader, and many of the business aspects of how my participants started their own business around tarot reading.

## Chapter V

### The Fool's Journey: a Career Path

“Few practitioners besides the ministers of small cult-like groups are able to earn all of their living from the occult. Most people work full-time in exoteric jobs,” (Jorgensen 1982:377). As many people probably have, I never thought tarot reading required so much work as an occupation—in truth I never really put much thought into it. During my research I noticed several of my professional participants had other occupations and were tarot readers on the side just like Jorgensen stated. I have come to the conclusion that it is like starting a business, and that business is made of just one person. However, becoming a professional is not like starting a lawn mowing or pet sitting service when you are young; it is more like starting a cupcake business. One needs time, experience, skill, money while you are building a reputation, and be able to do all of that to obtain a large pool of clientele to really keep the ability to put food on the table. In this chapter I will analyze the process of how my participants created their business practices and go over the communal aspects of becoming a professional tarot reader through learning their skill, personalizing their rituals, overcoming obstacles, and adhering themselves to the moral compass of a fortune-teller. I will also share and discuss stories my participants have shared with me about times they have had with clients.

#### *Ritual and Technique*

As stated in previous sections tarot readers create their own personalized way of reading the deck, from adding cards for clarity to creating new spreads to fit their reading style—this is both a sign of their experience and skill. . The major distinction between professional and hobbyist is most definitely the difference between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how.’ This is reflected in the following passage:

There is a famous philosophical distinction between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how.’ To know that is to grasp explicit propositions: you know that the sky is blue, that the earth is round, and that Monday precedes Tuesday in the order of the week. These are facts of the matter, clearly and specifically endorsed. Knowing that is a verbal acquisition, and to teach others, you tell them what they ought to know. To know how is to have a skill. You know how to row a boat, and you know how to draw. You teach others to know how by demonstrating, by showing what to do, whether this know-how can always be verbalized is a deep question. A fine jockey who had great knowledge of his horses may find it difficult to explain his skills to the uninitiated, but

it is not clear if his practical knowledge is inherently in-articulable. But for the most part the distinction is uncontentious (Luhrmann 1989:203).

Knowing how tarot reading works requires experience, intuitive skills, the ability to combine different principals, and understanding both the metaphysical and scientific aspects of the deck's meaning. People who are not professional, like myself, only understand the 'know that' aspect of the tarot: we read a book, understand what each symbol means, know the motions of reading tarot cards through self-teaching or study, but lack the experience to truly understand how the skill works. All of my participants have the experience and 'know how' of tarot reading and for many of my participants it was difficult to explain how certain aspects of their life effected their reading and vice versa.

I was able to distinguish a few aspects of tarot reading that are gained through experience based on my conversations with participants. To name a few off the bat: clarifying cards, anchors (base or focus cards), different meanings for the iconography, customizing spreads, creating personalized rituals to read cards, as well as other tips and tricks they have gained from mentors, communities and other influential people. The first two I mentioned related to the protocol of adding extra cards or of the cards that fall from the deck while shuffling. Though many books and other readers describe the first card in the spread to be the base or anchor card, Kim told me:

I pull the bottom card and it's my anchor. [...] I learned it from that woman in New York that I was telling you about because she reads the entire deck in a pyramid when she does your reading... he-he... all the cards... on the table... and she starts from the bottom and works her way up this pyramid and, so that bottom card is that anchor and I started incorporated that into all my readings and it works. It's really helpful.

Through experience and exploration of the self, readers will personalize their practice like this, creating a unique form to work with and have many quips and techniques added to their skill. Cards that fall out of the deck while shuffling are sometimes used as anchors, though depending on when the card falls from the deck they could also be used as clarity cards. This also depends on the belief of the reader as some may just ignore fallen cards and put them back in the deck and continue on—much like the belief of if the card placed in the spread is pulled from the deck upside down the meaning is reversed but that also falls under iconography interpretations.

The vast symbolic iconography of the tarot often requires readers to use knowledge from other disciplines to give meaning to their interpretations during a reading. Kim, owner of the Raven and Crone, explained, "Numerology and astrology are inherent in the tarot. You can't really have tarot

without the other as the tarot's foundations are based on these concepts somewhat." In order to weave through what Victor Turner (1967:19-47) describes as "polyvalent symbolism"- the web of associated meanings created by an individual's interpretation - numerology and astrology are the two main disciplines tarot readers use to aid in interpreting the tarot. Though these correlations are not directly expressed when first learning the tarot; experienced readers, like Kim, Summer, Dixie and Allison (to name a few) have integrated (at least) these disciplines into their readings to weed through the possibilities and even fill in several details for the client.

### ***Accounts of the Tarot Reading Ritual***

In the context of this next section, I will use the term ritual, session, and tarot reading interchangeably to describe what I experienced in my participant-observation. As stated in previously, I was able to participate in three or four tarot reading sessions: one in the Raven and Crone by Allison, one in Sage's office, and two with Kelley in a café. The basic steps of a tarot reading are as follows: the tarot deck is shuffled, cut and shuffled again, the cards are pulled and laid out in the spread, the reader interprets the cards, and then the client asks questions to understand that interpretation. There are variations that I have noticed with shuffling, amount of dialogue, and the addition of other steps to this basic ritual layout. The following describes both the entirety of my experiences with readings, and the steps each reader took to complete this ritual. These experiences are very different, which I would like to add is perfect for this type of research.

My first reading was with Allison who stated she would read my cards for the sake of research after our interview. The tea room in the back of the Raven and Crown provided a somewhat secluded and private space to do tarot readings, though, there is a window that you could see in to determine if the reader of the day is with someone. In this situation I noticed a social norm where no one entered the back room if a reading was being given. However, during our follow-up interview, Allison told me that the way she can determine if someone wants to talk to her, is based on how many times a person will come into the back room to determine if she is giving a reading or if she is just conversing. Based on the concept of divinatory dialogue, Allison was translating the signs of a potential client. Something she had picked up on while working as a tarot reader. It parallels how the Vodou are able to pinpoint who needs their help through a feeling when they see a group of people after the start of their initiation (Brown 2001).

To start the ritual, I sat at her table and was asked to pick a deck and shuffle them with a question or focus in mind that I would like work on. Allison uses two decks and lets her clients choose

which one to use for their reading. This give a more personal investment in the reading—since tarot readings are very personal—to the point of choosing the deck the reader uses is a unique factor that adds to the personal experience. After shuffling, I cut the deck and Allison laid out the top cards into



a Celtic Cross Spread. This is a ten-card spread including spaces for the anchor or root of the problem; your past, present and future; the helping and crossing/opposing elements in the situation, how others view the situation, your views, hopes and fears of the situation, and finally the outcome. Allison first noticed patterns in the cards (see image left), as I had pulled many face cards (trump or court cards), and the sword suite

created a semi-crescent pattern in the spread. I was not told the significance of the pattern but was told how the face cards described me as a very social person, and how the sword suite was associated with intellect and health. I validated the number of swords to show up in my reading with my own knowledge. I had recently injured my hand as well as been sick with atypical bronchitis, two waves of the flue, and an upper respiratory infection the previous semester which was proving an obstacle for me. I had explained my illnesses to her only after she had told me I needed to take better care of myself.

Though she saw my own personal relationship (romantic) problems when reading the individual cards, she also interpreted my struggle with my academics. Through clarifying questions, she was able to piece together what advice I needed to get out of the session—taking time for myself when my classes got too stressful, taking better care of my health, taking it all one step at a time, and all that. She told me “once I lay the cards down... it just hits me... like three dimensional chess,” to describe how her own psychic and intuition abilities played an integral part in determining what advise I needed. At the end of the session, we discussed more of my life and how each of the different meanings of the cards applied. We will find out if my current relationship will not work out like Allison interpreted during our session.

This experience is a good example of how my own knowledge of the situation—in this case I decided to focus on the space I was at with my schooling and my new relationship—was expressed through both verbal and non-verbal dialogue between me and Allison. It also gives an example of how meaning is created by both the spread of the cards and the individual position of the cards. Where the



spread in this case gave Allison a generic overview of who I was as a person at that point in my life, and the more in-depth reading gave me the advice I needed in those areas that I had wanted to focus on while shuffling the deck. A lot of statements of possible facts during this time, going through the cards giving definitions. Each of the five types of utterances was used by Allison during our reading—and I naturally responded with mainly the three basic utterances of a querent (Jorgensen 1984:139-40).

The ritual Allison conducted was very basic with very few alterations that I had noticed from my own personal experience using the Celtic Cross spread. Her abilities suggested she had many years of experience in what she was doing and her style of reading also suggested as such. She did not want to know what I wanted to focus the reading on—even though I did not know what to focus on either as I was too excited to really move let alone think of an individual problem to focus on in my life, which explains the wide scopes of interpretations on my relationship, personality, health, and academics. All aspect that many of my participants were qualities of a skilled reader and a generic reading.

Though I had mentioned earlier in our conversation about how I mangled my hand the summer previous (was a fresh scar from 12 stitches needed to reattach most of my palm), Allison gave great concern and empathy for my health before, during, and after the reading. Between that and the advice aspect of the ritual, this is a great example of Orion's concept of the witch versus the physician. "They stand by, support, and empower the patient to heal her- or himself. While wealth is a symbol of the physician's success and effectiveness, lack of wealth is a symbol of the witch's honorable intent. She heals out of love and compassion, without thought of material enrichment" (1995:158). Allison did not ask anything of me and offered advice and even pain relieving cream for my hand prior to the reading.

My second reading I had with Sage in her office that she works out of a few times a week. The building is a house that has multiple offices in it from yoga instructors, to intuitive readers, to musicians, writers and meditation instructors. We made tea downstairs before heading up to her office. Sage's office was at the head of the stairs which was just big enough to be homey and not claustrophobic. I sat at her table that was adorned with crystals, bells, and the deck of tarot cards we would use for the session. Before starting the ritual, Sage asked me about what I would like to focus on, and made a list so she knew what to look for. This is different than with Allison, who had just asked me to focus on shuffling the cards with my idea rather than straight forwardly telling her. During my interviews, many participants had brought up that they did not want to know the question at hand

to make the reading more accurate. The reason Sage does it this way, is because of a few reasons: one, because I set up a meeting with her privately (and paid for) for intuitive guide work, and two, the in-depth stages that Sage adds to this ritual (she explained in our interview) include other forms of energy work that can encompass life-times of information. The reason that was explained to me as to why she chooses to focus the ritual at the beginning is to be able to focus her mind on those parts without being clouded by other aspects that would not be relevant to what the client wanted to work on.

To begin the ritual, Sage guided me through a calming meditation where she opened the space—much like I have experienced with religious rituals—and called spirit guides to the session and asked that if I had any guides to bring them into the session as well. We sat in silence for a few moments while Sage felt my hands and meditated. Then we discussed my passed lives, the spirit animals that she saw around me, and that my life essence did not have a container. When I asked what she meant about my essence not having a container, she explained that everyone’s aura or life force has a shape. Most peoples is tight against the body or in some form of contained space to protect itself from outside influences, but I did not have one. Sage told me that is why I am so high energy or heavily influenced by others. Which I confirmed, as a sign of the monkey (Chinese zodiac), I was a very social and easily influenced person: when someone is emotional, I also become emotional. She also told me about how my past lives showed a high creative energy that would be good for crafts that she did not expect to see. This made perfect sense to me seeing as I come from a long line of seamstresses. This is another example of how the ritual is validated through the client’s interpretation of their own life to make sense and give meaning to the reader’s intuitive interpretations (as present in the dialogue theory Zeitlyn (2001) presents in his research).

After Sage told me about my passed lives, the cards were shuffled and placed again in a Celtic Cross spread, though the process was different. A card had fallen out of the deck while shuffling—she picked up the card, deemed it significant, and set in at the bottom of the deck. She mentioned later this was because the card was meant to be read with this reading and was a crucial card to give more insight to the reading. Several other of my participants also believe in this aspect of cards being meant to be in a spread if they “jump out of the deck.” Using her own personalized technique to create a method that works for her. Sage uses the existential function of tarot reading in finding herself and create her own personalized relationship with the cards. Through my own experiences with the deck, I have noticed that these cards can go both ways: some prove helpful to a reading and other not so much. Instead of asking me questions, she would tap on a card twice then pull clarity cards and place them on top of the card she tapped, giving her the insight she needed to understand things. This

is completely different than the reading with Allison where dialogue was used. In this instance, the more Sage pulled cards, the more she could give me without compromising the validity of the reading since she had already asked me about what I wanted to focus on.

Sage explained the spread first card by card, then giving me a more in-depth interpretation based on the position of the cards and clarifying cards she had pulled. After, we discussed how the reading as a whole was applicable to my life situation as it was in that moment. As Whyte (1991) suggested in her research, the validity of the reading as well as much of the meaning and applicability of the interpretation of the reader, is established through dialogue between the reader and the client. Though Kelley had her own interpretation of this aspect when I asked her thoughts. She mentioned a similar version to this theory, in which the conversation was between the reader, the client, and the *divinity*—not the divination tool or the audience like Whyte (1991) or Zeitlyn (2001) suggest in the literature.

The use of divinatory dialogue varies across the board with all of my readings, from not asking me my focus to having a focus, but not any dialogue to start out the reading. I did witness all of the utterances described by Jorgensen (1984).

### ***Becoming a Professional***

During my interviews, I asked each reader how they were first introduced to the tarot and each would explain the path that they had taken to get to becoming professional tarot reader. These paths include the stages of rites of passage that Van Gennep's discusses in his writings. The first stage Van Gennep identifies is separation. This stage is very subtle, but the first step of becoming a tarot reader is having a deck of cards. This separates the reader from the majority, in a very minute way but enough to notice a difference. There is an even smaller separation stage where the reader finally makes the conscious decision to read for strangers, though this could bleed into the second stage. The second stage in Gennep's writings is the initiation or transition stage, during all of my readers' rite of passage, each had a period of time that was roughly 10 years (give or take). During this time of initiation, the readers were taking their first step out of being a person interested in the tarot and really learning the art to actively read for people. The reintegration or stage where the reader is welcomed back into the community as an established tarot reader comes next. This stage is catalyzed by signs from the community. All of my participants described a period where after they had read for free for a long time (a trait of the transition stage) and had been told by almost all of their friends that they should

be reading for money and either felt that it was time to start charging for their services, finalizing their reintegration with their new status. The following is Sage's experience during her rite of passage:

Around the age of 18-19 years old, I was finding my own path separate from how I was raised. I was raised in a very... somewhat traditional, Christian up-bringing from the age of... five till 18. Before the age of five my mother really helped to actually hone my intuition. So she always had that openness to the intuitive part of our mind and encouraged that but I was still raise in this belief system of Christianity. And I was looking for more, I really was looking to... listen to this part of myself that I had had with me my entire life and I ... I found the tarot through a friend of mine's mother, who read and she did my first reading for me, and she was a witch, and was immediately taken with it. I got my... my mother supported it and she was also in a place of searching at that time, and she bought me—my mother bought me my first deck.

Through the support of her community, her friend, her friend's mother, and her mother, Sage was able to explore the tarot and really use the existential function to create her own identity starting her career path to life coaching and tarot reading.

So, I'm 40 now so I've been reading since I was 19. [...] Started with a book and a deck [...] Practicing on my friends and on people, kept in quiet [...] In my late 20's I worked for a help center that worked that did biofeedback and one of the women there really noticed that I had this gift with the patients and I had a very natural intuition. And she started referring some of the patients to me, to work with me on an intuitive level, and I would do a combination of... looking at their—first I started with photographs before I would meet them. I would just get their photograph but I would do whole intuitive write-up for them and then I would do card spreads based on their question. And that started to become a little more structured and I started doing very specific trades with people rather than just giving them away for free.

Here, Sage describes the period of time a professional goes through before the calling happens. To equate this to Van Guepp's model, this would be the separation stage. When a tarot reader works for free on the street or is just learning out, they are separated from both the non-professional tarot community (which includes Brittany, Richard, Sapphire, Sharron, Laurel, and Lola as hobbyists who give readings to friends and family members or anyone who asks) and the professional tarot community (who provide a priced service to the public). Though this time period is not spent in a hut

or room like in Vodou (Brown 2001) it is still the learning period in between the communities which can be indefinite. Tarot readers at this stage are waiting for a sign, or a calling of permission from the universe to charge for their services and some are longer than others.

So trade like that for many years. And then I had a Friend in my early 30's refused to trade with me and she just pushed money at me. She said 'you need to take [money for this]. You are really good at this. You've been doing it for a long time. You need to take money for it.' And I had a hard time with it. It was hard for me at first, to accept the income for it. I definitely hid the tarot as part of my identity a little bit because of the Christian up-bringing. So there was this part of me that was a little bit afraid of what people might think if I brought it out as a service to the public and advertised and all that. And then I started just getting [...] signs and feelings and very direct communication from the universe that it was okay now to take money, that I was ready. So I started charging for them but it was on the side.

Sage describes the event that professional tarot readers look for to start their careers. Many of my participants discussed how a novice is not "allowed" to charge, or how it is wrong for a novice to charge because they lack the experience. It is similar when tarot readers are just starting out in the community, without the established experience there cannot be any charging because to do so would suggest that you are conning people out of their money using generic and basic techniques without intuition of how to read the language of symbols. "I don't think it's ethical for someone who is still learning to all of a sudden charge for a reading," (Sage). This idea of what is or isn't ethical is confirmed by Jorgensen who stated, "who is and is not qualified to practice as a professional in the community is determined by formal codes of ethics, lists of approved practitioners, and a variety of informal norms. A key issue is the perceived legitimacy of practitioners," (1982:378).

It was kind of a side project while I worked another job. I have worked many jobs. And then about two years ago now I decided to do it fulltime, and take that leap of faith. It got catalyzed by a woman I met at the airport. Her name was carol bowman, and she is a past life technotherapist. And we got stuck on a flight and we ended up talking and in her career she is very successful, and I asked her how she deals with ridicule "eh, they either get it or they don't. They either love it or they don't." [...] I started to put myself out there as a reader and quit my job.

Sage describes all of the stages I mentioned earlier and even had a second stage of transition where her skills as a reader were doubted and then after convincing, taking the stage into reintegrating back into the community. All of my participants had a similar experience; making this a common enough process for me to accurately describe it as a rite of passage.

During the transition stage (and also through experiences after reintegration), a reader will develop their own style of reading. This will include what decks they like to use, spreads they have created that work for them, as well as the way they create the ritual of their readings.

But, yea, it's about experimentation. Each person has their own style. I've seen people who do Celtic crosses backwards, like they'll have the past in the future and I'm like 'oh, wait, you've flopped those cards.' I've developed my own readings. [...] I do what feels right. And my cards know. We have our relationship. I think any experienced reader has their own spread because it works for them. (Kim)

Confirming not only the existential function of finding the Self but also how existential sociology is used to create a relationship with the cards and develop their own unique style of reading which furthers my argument of identity construction is created by a reader's relationship with the deck and their interactions with the cards.

### ***Morals of a Tarot Reader***

I discuss earlier in my methods and at the beginning of this analysis that I had used my interviews to determine what types of tarot readers were considered fake—as a major characteristic of a subculture, I needed to determine who my participant did not associate with. Overall, my participants answered this question primarily with some form of disclaimer that included “I believe that all tarot readers have good intentions” or some form of morality that did not allow them to judge a reader right off the bat that they were false. Though these were the characteristics of the tarot readers my participants would warn their clients against—making them the “other category.” The characteristics of a fake tarot reader, or a reader who is “full of shit,” include many of the following traits (given repeatedly by almost all of my participants): lack of experience, lack of intuition, and vague readings that lack depth. In Vodou, a reader who is full of shit focuses on earning money (Brown 2001). Kirti agreed with this notion and gave Hindu versions of what Brown describes in her book.

In some cases my participants agreed that a good tarot reader will not give negative readings and will try to their fullest capability to give active ways to help their client get the most out of a reading. These “fake” readers given these characteristics can be analyzed as still in the transition stage

and by subcultural standards of tarot reading “should not charge for readings,” (Sage). These factors are all affected by background and personal expectations within the community as discussed at length in the previous chapter. Kelley added to her own perception on why some readers were unable to create an accurate reading by revealing how most readers have “holes in their energy fields” and are too open to be able to truly focus on their client’s energy to give an accurate reading. Many of my participants discussed how the client is a big part of the reading—even Whyte discusses the importance of the client. Though the ability to give an accurate reading is done in different ways based on what works for the reader, whether that be clarity through dialogue, clarity cards, or reshuffling the deck.

However, Jorgensen states “there is little support for the hypothesis that occult claims to knowledge depend on con artistry. Because occultism provides for the discovery of meaning, sincere occultists simply have no need for self-conscious trickery” (1984:145). Which make sense since earth based religions believe in Karma, and Wicca has the Rule of Three which states anything you put out comes back times three. Also how “impression management as part of a professional culture (for physicians, attorneys, and therapists) are readily recognizable strategies of a goal-directed conscious or unconscious process in which people attempt to influence the perceptions of others about a person, object, or event,” (Jorgensen 1984:145). Arguing the stereotype that he labels as gypsy, or gypsy-like behavior—which contain the aspects of a swindler—the tarot communities share this skill of impression management but only use it as a clarifier. As previously stated intuition is a major aspect of tarot reading and without it the ability to translate the divinatory language is near impossible.

Though I did not focus on the gender biases of this topic, I did ask three of my participants if they encountered any gender biases within the tarot communities. Kirti said that in India, Tarot and Astrology are seen as mainly woman’s spheres so she has not encountered any biases or gender hierarchy. Though this would suggest that any man entering into this field would meet a wall of scrutiny. Richard (being the male perspective of my research) stated that he did not encounter any biases toward himself, but had recently met another reader at a tarot convention who was very bias towards women stating:

This topic came up and he was very candid in telling me that in his experience, men can be more successful than women in fortune telling. He said men can charge more, and attract more clients. Part of this is because there really aren’t that many male Tarot professionals so they tend to stand out. He also said the dynamic between a male versus a female reader and a client is different. According to him, the energy

between two women can be abrasive, but between a man and a woman the dynamic usually flows better. He added that a lot of women relate better to men, and as a male reader, it's much easier to keep control of a reading session in general.

Though I was not expecting the full circle and logic in what Richard had to say about this new acquaintance, it was very interesting to discover. I myself get along much better with males in relation to specific positions (such as professors, and authority figures). However, the opposite could be said for other positions (such as any type of medical profession). When I asked Kim, she had said that she had met some major biases towards women stating that with the exception of her agent, who also read tarot cards, every male tarot reader she had encountered was of the opinion that male tarot readers were better than women. I remember walking down in the French Quarter of Louisiana in the summer and walking past a male gypsy whose whole marketing ploy was that men were better than women at telling the future.

Creating a moral code of what it means to be a true and decent tarot reader proved very simple for almost all of my participant with only a few hesitations to figure out how to word their answers. It was mainly in this part of my research that I discovered that many of my participants positioned me as an outsider. A student with a passion for tarot reading is the role I was filling in their minds. Which soon turned around for some of my participants, but for the most part, when describing who is a good or bad tarot reader I noticed the hesitation in their minds to create what would be a polished version of what they truly thought. As this section creates the idea of who “they” are as mentioned in chapter three, I will continue to elaborate on the creation of identity among the members of the tarot community.

### ***Employment or Personalization?***

Becoming a professional takes time and effort, job hunting entails many free readings for potential employers, waiting to be able to charge, but also creating a technique that works for the reader. Personalizing the structure of the reading to be able to establish a time-limit, as well as a fixed price for your services. The main goal of a professional reader is to establish clientele to create a steady income.

A claim to special expertise can be made on the basis of long-standing commitment and practice. Such a claim is tested by community gatekeepers through observation of the person and informal discussion [...] if further observation and discussion support the claim, the person is accepted as a member of the community



and provided the corresponding privileges of membership. If not the person is denied these privileges.” (Jorgensen 1982:379)

Many of my participants have a clientele base that only read from them, for instance Kelley will do phone readings for her clients out of state (so does Kim, Leigh and Allison). With clientele over a vast area, the word will spread faster creating a growing pool of clients to keep anyone busy. The key is to help people by guiding them through the reading and even suggest ways to fix problem areas in the querent’s reading or life.

People who lose job, I make them find job. People who sick, I treat them. Their husband or wife leave them, I make that person come back. After I come back from Haiti second time, I did not have to work outside again.’ Alourdes’s reputation as a good woman and a strong *manbo* [vodou priestess], fair to her clients and effective in her treatments, has grown steadily since then (Brown 2001:77).

The Vodou ideal of magic is that bad or black magic is so much easier than good magic. Good magic takes time, practice, and accuracy. Here, brown discusses how Alourdes (a recently initiated Vodou priestess) establishes her clientele in Brooklyn by only doing good magic as there is no point in learning bad magic.

Among the professional readers in my participant pool, there are two types of tarot readers: Tarot readers and Life Coaches. Sage is a life coach with her other services and elaborate rituals. Kelley and Allison are both Tarot readers—they give you the same advice but focus mainly on tarot readings. Summer is in a second separation stage where she will enter into the life coach sect of the tarot community. When asked about how she would go about becoming a full-time professional reader, Summer stated:

To me, I think it's all about marketing and just being seen. And so in the spring, summer, and fall, I'm set because I read tarot downtown with the street musicians and stuff like that; so I set up like in Pack Square downtown and people come to me and I do readings for them. So, I do really well with that and I do private readings, and I offer other things like sacred ritual and creation of vision boards and stuff like that. And I am building my website and I'm learning how to market myself with social media. So Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogging—that kind of thing. For instance, like, the way that you show up the most when someone searches your name is by blogging a lot. So it's who's out there, who's writing, who's saying interesting things and I think that there are a lot of people out there who want to learn that maybe don't

have anyone to learn from in their hometown for something so they are seeking something out on the Internet. So eventually, I want to set it up so that I have the technology to teach classes online and have the technology to do readings online and I can apply for jobs right now where I would give a reading for an agency and that's what I'm going to kind of move in the direction of. So there's a lot of different things that you can do I'm also going to start doing corporate and private parties.

Sumer plans to add several services to her business, like sacred ritual and Reiki to push her business into the Life Coach sphere. Though I personally never would have realized how much becoming a tarot reader is like becoming a small business owner. Doing this by oneself seemed astronomical to me, though many of my participants had similar starts, Kim mentioned having an Agent—like a manager or like an actor(ess) has to find work for you. I remember thinking how cool it would be to have an agent or a manager to schedule gigs and venues for you—that would certainly make things easier. In my marketing class we needed to know what the demographic was and how to cater to your target market and all the marketing techniques to make your product a better competing product. Relating back to the psychic fair where “making money depends on visibility, accessibility, and attractiveness to clientele this matter is very important. [...] the attractiveness of one’s booth [at a psychic fair] to the general public may make the difference between making and not making money,” (Jorgensen 1979:118). It is the same when starting a business—you market your look to appeal to shoppers and passersby to stop and purchase what you are selling. Though sometimes this can be detrimental to business if it goes too over the top or incorporates too much of the gypsy spirit.

### ***Conclusion***

My professional participants read in tea shops, restaurants, flea markets, festivals, occult shops, corporate parties, in their own or their client’s homes, and even over the phone. These women were all very well established with years of experience, business cards, posters, official websites, a clientele base, and even agents and private offices. I discussed the ways in which to start a business of tarot reading and the rites one goes through to become a proper tarot reader. I also discuss who “they” are and the stigma of gypsy culture—how gypsy is seen as a fake or a swindler in the tarot community.

## Chapter VI Tapping the Deck

At the end of each tarot reading, or the end of each day (if you are a professional reader) the reader will cleanse the deck of residual energy given to it by the quarents. This is done by one of four ways: shuffling, a ritual, moon bathing, or tapping on both sides of the deck. So, here at the conclusion of my research, I am going to cleanse or analyze the remaining thoughts of my study. The following is a recap of how readers of the tarot construct their identity through their engagement with the cards, personalization of associated meanings to interpret the tarot, and struggle through their own Hero's Journey to become established members of their communities.

The identity of tarot readers within the community are created both individually and communally. However, as the existential function of tarot reading is the creation of the self and the exploration of self-knowledge, the beginning of the Fool's Journey is one taken alone. By the time the Fool reaches the World card at the end of his journey, the tarot community has given the morals and ethics of new professional readers. Furthermore, tarot readers use their individual backgrounds in religious and cultural spheres to form their bonds with the tarot. Creating personalized interactions and techniques to sift through the vast webs of meaning as described by Turner's (1967) concept of polyvalent symbolism.

The developed imagination, intuition and insight as affective qualities for practicing the interpretation of the tarot images become significant components of an alternative educational model focused on the three P's [intuition, insight and imagination] that, as such, provides us with an unorthodox ground of certainty that we ourselves lay down or construct in our practical experience (Semetsky 2011:258). Here the importance of intuition and divinatory dialogue come into. The language of symbols as described by Thorley and Tedlock create the vast webs of meaning that creates the complex interpretive data the cards give us. However I cannot forget that "discussion and exploration of concepts of divination in the academy requires acknowledgement and admission of the importance of personal experience of essential divination by the academic researcher" (Thorley, et al 2013:261). Placing existential sociology right at the heart of the foundation of my research because everyone experiences the world in different ways from fear and pain, to joy and love. The tarot is no different as it follows the major archetypes of the human condition as laid out by Carl Jung.

### ***Limitations***

I knew there would be limitations to my research using all the methods I have previously described. Any results I find may not be able to identify a broad enough generalization of tarot reading because of biases within my sample, or my own biases. Using a snowball method for my sample, I risked having my interviewee not know anyone they can refer to me, which happened a few times. More importantly, I risked having the participants not take my research seriously and falsify data. As in any research, the possibility of sample error and non-sample error is always a risk—where there is an issue either with the way data was collected or how the data was handled once it was in my hands (input error). I also did not account for tarot readings to be personal enough to warrant volunteers, during my research I asked two or three of my participants if I could observe them giving a tarot reading to someone and was not very well received, so I stuck to personal experience. I could have asked a friend to come with me to observe her/him getting a tarot reading to give me a firsthand account addition to my research besides my own experience. Though I don't think it would have done much for the focus of my paper, which is why I threw out the idea. I think if I were doing a master's thesis and were writing a dissertation or a book, I would probably conduct a survey for people who have ever gotten a tarot reading and have them describe their experience—that would be an interesting section to study. One of my participants told me that the good thing about the type of research required for this project was how it allowed the student to continue their research even after graduation into a book or into a published work because the contacts were already made and the experience was already gained in the fields needed to collect more data. All I or any other student needed to do was expand on it.

### ***Importance***

My research is important because the current literature expresses many different examples of how divination is used but not how meaning is constructed. I want to know what effects the meaning and interpretation of a tarot card reading—as far as my literature review states; this has yet to be explored and that is what I studied. An anthropologist knows their work is significant when their participants show gratitude for taking interest. I was welcomed by these women and was able to discover their stories and present them here through an anthropological lens. I presented it from a more ethnographic perspective, from the standpoint of the reader and construct why they do what they do. This study is important because tarot reading is becoming more and more popular in today's social and mainstream media. However, Kelley gave me this bit of advice during the end of our interview which I think should be presented here:

You're not there to present solid answers, you are there to present the mystery and let people know it is a universal pool of learning they can access anytime. No matter where they are in their life, no matter what they're going through. They are on the Hero's Journey and tarot allows them a place to meditate and move forward to the next step. So, they can keep learning and move [forward and] decide 'when is the next chapter,' [or decide] when you start over. [...] you are not going to leave them with answers that they are going to be satisfied with. Leave them with the question. Don't try to satisfy, let them want to go off and want to read something else about it after reading your paper. That's the true gift of it (Kelley).

With great help from my participants, I hope I will leave whoever reads this with the question and the curiosity to pursue further investigation. That is the true significance of my paper.

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## Appendix I

### Interview Guide for Professional Tarot Readers

1. Do you have an occupation other than reading tarot cards?
  - a. Yes?
    - i. Specify:
    - ii. What percent of your income comes from tarot reading?
2. What are your religious views? Spiritual vs religious
3. How would you describe your political views?
4. Do these (religious and political views and other jobs) have an effect on the way you read tarot cards?
  - a. How?
5. What is the average length of time it takes you to do a reading?
6. What is the average number of hours per week that you spend on
  - a. Readings for money: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Readings not for money: \_\_\_\_\_
7. How much do you charge for a reading?
8. Where do you do your readings?
  - a. Home
  - b. Office
  - c. Church
  - d. Bookstore
  - e. Other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_
9. Which spreads do you use in your readings? Decks?
10. What type of client usually requests your services?
  - a. Age
  - b. Gender
  - c. Ethnicity
  - d. Class
11. What type of questions are most frequently asked of the tarot in your reading?
12. Do you read tarot cards for yourself?
  - a. If not why?

13. Do you ask others to read tarot cards for you?
  - a. Who do you let read your tarot?
14. Do you associate with other tarot readers professionally?
  - a. Socially?
15. Who would you consider a fake or a bad tarot reader?
16. Do you use tarot cards for any purpose other than divinatory readings?
  - a. If so what?
17. Have you ever had any out-of-the-ordinary, or psychic experiences?
  - a. Please describe:
    - i. Type
    - ii. Intensity
18. Are you a member of any occult/psychic groups?
  - a. Which ones?
19. Do you practice any of the following?
  - a. Witchcraft/Wicca
  - b. Numerology
  - c. Palmistry
  - d. Astrology
  - e. Tea leaf Readings
  - f. Other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_
20. Do you employ any of those practices in your tarot reading?
  - a. If so, which?
  - b. How?
21. How did you first get involved with reading tarot cards?
22. What role does tarot reading play in your life?
23. How does reading Tarot play into your identity?
24. Basically, what is your philosophy regarding the cards?
  - a. The readings?

## Appendix II

### Interview Guide for Non-Professional Tarot Readers

1. What is your occupation?
2. What are your religious views? Spiritual vs religious
3. How would you describe your political views?
4. Do these (religious and political views and occupation) have an effect on the way you read tarot cards?
  - a. How?
5. What is the average length of time it takes you to do a reading?
6. Do you charge for readings?
7. Where do you do your readings?
  - a. Home
  - b. Office
  - c. Church
  - d. Bookstore
  - e. Other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_
1. Which spreads do you use in your readings? Decks?
2. What type of client usually requests your services?
  - f. Age
  - g. Gender
  - h. Ethnicity
  - i. Class
3. What type of questions are most frequently asked of the tarot in your reading?
4. Do you read tarot cards for yourself?
  - j. If not why?
5. Do you ask others to read tarot cards for you?
  - k. Who do you let read your tarot?
6. Do you associate with other tarot readers?
  - l. Socially?
7. Who would you consider a fake or a bad tarot reader?
8. Do you use tarot cards for any purpose other than divinatory readings?

- m. If so what?
9. Have you ever had any out-of-the-ordinary, or psychic experiences?
- n. Please describe:
    - i. Type
    - ii. Intensity
10. Are you a member of any occult/psychic groups?
- o. Which ones?
11. Do you practice any of the following?
- p. Witchcraft/Wicca
  - q. Numerology
  - r. Palmistry
  - s. Astrology
  - t. Tea leaf Readings
  - u. Other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you employ any of those practices in your tarot reading?
- v. If so, which?
  - w. How?
13. How did you first get involved with reading tarot cards?
14. What role does tarot reading play in your life?
15. How does reading Tarot play into your identity?
16. Basically, what is your philosophy regarding the cards?
- x. The readings?